NUCLEAR WASTE POLICY AMENDMENTS ACT

Mr. CRAIG. Mr. President, I come to the floor to speak about a piece of legislation that has been introduced by our colleague, Senator JIM INHOFE, of Oklahoma, S. 2551. It is entitled the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act of 2008.

The reason I do this is multiple in the issue of nuclear energy today and the management of the waste stream that flows from not only current nuclear reactors operating in our energy portfolio, but, of course, the growth of generating capability through nuclear reaction as it relates to all that is going on out there from the creation of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, the 30-plus reactors that are on the drawing boards today, and the opportunity to see new reactors built in our country to supplement and build our energy base, and the issue of how we handle the waste.

As most Senators know, Yucca Mountain, a permanent deep geologic repository in Nevada, has become increasingly controversial over the years largely because of the delegation from Nevada and the antinuclear folks, but also the reality of reprocessing and still finding a permanent repository for nuclear waste. I strongly support Yucca Mountain. I believe we need a deep geologic repository, whether it is for the current waste that is in storage at most of our reactors or whether it is for the refined waste that would come from a reprocessing stream. So for a few moments today I thought I would share with fellow Senators a legacy that most don't realize but I find extremely important in this overall debate of a nuclear renaissance and Congress getting real and honest about how we handle a waste stream, instead of the political football that some would like it to be and, therefore, create the uncertainty that results from that.

In my State of Idaho, I have a national laboratory. The State of Idaho hosts one of our Nation's premier energy laboratories, known as the INL, Idaho National Laboratory. It started in 1949. It started for the sole purpose of a national reactor testing site, where reactors would be built and tested before they went into commercial use or, at this time and place, mostly military use and for national security purposes. So a site that was started in 1949 actually saw by 1951 the lighting of the first light bulb ever lit in America by nuclear reaction. That site today is now a museum, so dedicated by President Lyndon Johnson. Many people have come to see the first reactor ever built to light the first light bulb ever lit by nuclear reaction in this country.

Since that time, 52 test reactors have been built onsite at the Idaho National Laboratory. Idaho is also, therefore, the home of something else—the legacy of nuclear reactors. Three hundred metric tons of spent nuclear material and 4,000 metric tons of high-level waste are stored at this national laboratory. Most of this waste was generated from defense and from our Navy's nuclear program. In fact, one of the most successful programs ever in the history of the world has been our naval vessels powered by nuclear reaction. All of the waste from those reactors over the years has been stored at Idaho.

Idaho was the premier training location for our men and women in the nuclear Navy to come and learn how to manage and operate nuclear reactors in our nuclear Navy. We also have waste from West Valley in New York, and other locations, because Idaho has been the recipient of that waste. But I must say that as a result of that, the Federal Government signed an agreement with Idaho some years ago that all of that waste would go to Yucca Mountain by 2035, or to a deep geologic repository other than the State of Idaho, where it is now stored in dry storage and in wet storage.

There is no other disposable option for our Navy's high-level waste. Because of the configuration of the waste, of those reactor fuel rods, they cannot be reprocessed. So they, unlike the commercial reactor spent fuel rods, have to go into a permanent home and permanent waste. Idaho, South Carolina, and the State of Washington are all relying on Yucca Mountain for permanent disposal of this waste.

So it is critical that this Senate, this Government, doesn't put aside the issue of Yucca Mountain, but that we deal with it in a forthright way, that we recognize there is truly a need for some geologic storage of our types of waste, especially our military waste that, in many instances, is stored in South Carolina, Washington, and my State of Idaho.

As I said in my opening comments, since we passed the Energy Policy Act of 2005, and we began to streamline the process to bring a new design construction concept on line and grant guarantees for the construction of nuclear reactors for commercial electrical production, there has been what many call a renaissance as it relates to the possibility of pouring concrete to actually build new reactors.

Certainly, the debate of climate change, the emission of greenhouse gases has caused us to recognize the need for what we call baseloading of our electrical system with large units of production that are nonemitting. And, of course, at this time, technology says the only one that is out there in that high-capacity way would be a nuclear reactor. That is also clearly what has fed the growth, the desire to develop, the licensing process that is underway, the design concepts, the attempt to locate new reactors at current sites and facilities.

Something happened in my State of Idaho this past week that tells me and should tell the world there is still a great deal of uncertainty out there as it relates to siting a nuclear reactor. Part of that uncertainty is the unwillingness of this Congress to get on with the issue of siting a deep geologic repository, getting the licensing process over, dealing with reprocessing, and truly bringing our arms around the issue of the waste stream.

Mid-America, a large utility in the Midwest that has recently acquired utilities in Idaho and adjoining States or at least utilities that feed part of Idaho's electricity, made the decision that they would attempt to build a nuclear reactor in my State of Idaho. They looked all over the country and decided Idaho was the preferable location based on their needs and their need to load their service area and because they thought the climate was appropriate in Idaho. They studied it. They spent millions of dollars looking at that possibility. They determined this past week they would not move forward. Why? Because even under the most favorable conditions and in possibly the most favorable State, they found the uncertainty and the expense was still too great.

Who is Mid-America? It is an asset of Berkshire Hathaway. It is an asset of Warren Buffett, probably one of the deepest pockets in the world. Yet they and their studies, with due diligence, determined they would not move forward after millions of dollars were spent.

It was all based on cost and uncertainty, and part of that uncertainty rests right here in the Senate and with a Congress that will not in a clear, clean, decisive way say: We are going to deal with the issue of the waste stream as the rest of the component pieces that we put together to build a true nuclear renaissance in this country. It is critical we move forward. This legislation, S. 2551, speaks to that point. It speaks to that long-term importance.

I cosponsored legislation this past year that Senator DOMENICI and I introduced that dealt with the kinds of issues that are dealt with in S. 2551. These two bills, the Domenici-Craig bill, now the Inhofe-Craig-and-others bill, would allow Yucca Mountain to open on a predictable timeline, replacing, as I have said, the uncertainty. And it protects the citizens of Idaho, South Carolina, and 30 other States that are currently storing nuclear materials.

Nuclear energy, nuclear power clearly remains our best and brightest option in the near term as it relates to a sustainable, nonemitting source of energy for our country. Clearly, this Congress should not, and to date has not, stood in the way of building that renaissance from the policies passed in 2005, to the guarantees we are offering, to the new licensing process the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is now in the final stages of developing. The only piece left undone is the issue of waste stream, and it is critically important we deal with it. If we do not, if we were to put a blight on the potential growth

of nuclear energy, here is what could happen. From 1995 to 2006, nuclear power helped us avoid emitting more than 8 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Many States have started to say no to coal and yes to nuclear power or other forms of clean energy. But other than nuclear power, they are limited, and clearly we should not be saying no.

Our economy, our growth, future jobs for this country, the vitality of our economic leadership in the world is tied to available energy, abundant energy, and reasonable cost energy. We know today the one source of energy that answers all those charges is nuclear.

Yucca Mountain remains a key piece of all of that picture. That is why Senator INHOFE has introduced the legislation, why I am a cosponsor of it. I certainly encourage all my colleagues to look through clear glasses at this issue because we have to deal with the waste stream in a responsible fashion. We need to do so in a way that is acceptable to the industry and acceptable to the American people.

The efforts that have been put forth from day one in the examination of the geology, the development of the core tunnel at Yucca Mountain—all those stages are there for the public to see. The licensing process is now underway, which is the next step. Let's don't arbitrarily and politically step into the middle of it and mess it up.

I must tell you the frustration I have had listening to Presidential candidates out on the road. If you want the endorsement of a single State, you are against Yucca Mountain and that single State was Nevada. This is a national issue; it is not a local issue. This is Federal land properly handled, properly researched, and it can be properly developed in a safe way for all Americans and for our future. That is what this legislation speaks to.

I am pleased to be a cosponsor with Senator INHOFE. He introduced it in a timely fashion. Clearly, in the course of this year, it is something that needs to be debated; it is something with which we need to deal. This administration has moved forward as quickly and responsibly as they could, and the licensing process is certainly something that needs to be completed in the overall effort of the renaissance of nuclear power in our country and that form of generation as an important option in our mix of energy sources for this Nation for now and into the future.

I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ECONOMIC STIMULUS

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, I wished to rise to talk a little bit about the proposed stimulus package which is working its way through the Congress and has been agreed to between the President and the Speaker of the House.

First, I congratulate the Speaker, the Republican leader of the House, and the President, especially Secretary Paulson, for sitting down and trying to reach a bipartisan understanding as to how we move forward in what is obviously a very tentative economic time. We know in this Nation we are confronting some very serious issues, most of them brought on by a bubble in the credit markets relative to lending for housing construction. As happens with a classic bubble—and this is a classic bubble—when it bursts, when, in other words, the underlying security and the people responsible for paying back the debt cannot do that because money has been lent to people who are not in a position to repay their loans and the security under that debt has not been able to be maintained to reinstate the value of that debt, when that happens, that not only affects the loans, the immediate loans that are impacted, but it leads to a further contraction in the marketplace.

I have been through this a number of times in my experience, and it always seems to happen the same way with loans which turned out to be not well made being called, and they are then followed by the people who lent the money and the capital markets having to contract in order to basically build back up their capital positions. So people who actually have good loans find that they cannot get credit extended further and it feeds on itself and you start to see a slowdown. That appears to be the type of issue which we may be confronting as a Nation, where we know we have a huge subprime problem. It is very big. We know that may lead to a further contraction. In fact, we are already seeing that.

We know also, ironically, in this market, what happened was a lot of those loans were syndicated out and then they were put in synthetic instruments and actually multiplied their impact and we ended up with an inverted pyramid. We have one little loan with inadequate capital which can't be paid back, and then you have a pyramid with the way that loan is chopped up and can't be sold. So it is exaggerated in size. So this is a big issue for us as a nation. The question is how to address it.

Well, first off, I congratulate the Fed because the Fed has stepped up. I wish they had stepped up earlier, but they have stepped up and reduced rates and, as a result, that should create more liquidity in the market. The second is fiscal policy, and that is where the President's proposal, working with the Speaker of the House and the Republican leader, has come forward. It is called a stimulus package, the purpose of which, in an economic slowdown, is to pursue classic economic policy, which is to stimulate demand during a time of economic slowdown in order to stimulate the economy, generally. That is a ''black letter'' rule of how you try to abate the economic slowdown. The question is: Will it work? Will what has been put on the table make sense and will it work?

Remember the last time we did this—with what is known as the tax rebate, which are not tax rebates because most of the people getting these don't pay taxes, it is an income transfer—we were coming off a period of surplus, the only time of surplus in the last 30 years we have had as a Federal government. We had 3 years of surplus, and we felt we had cash in the till to rebate or to pay out. Now we don't have the surplus. In fact, we have a deficit. It is not a huge deficit but still a deficit. It has been coming down over the last few years, which is the good news. But it does mean any stimulus package we pursue is going to have a debt effect.

In other words, we are going to have to borrow the money in order to pay it out to people through this tax rebate or basic payment process. So who ends up paying it? Well, our children are going to pay the cost of this stimulus package, and it is going to be because it is a debt-compounding event. In other words, if the package represented today is to be $150 billion in cost over its lifetime, which is supposedly confined to this year, that debt that you have to borrow to pay the $150 billion will have interest earned on it. So after 10 years, that becomes $200 billion in debt because it won't be paid back over 10 years and our children and our children's children will have to pay the burden of that.

So basically we are saying to our children, some of whom haven't even started earning money yet, we are going to give you a $200 billion bill for this stimulus package we are going to put in place over the next 6 months. So if we are going to do something such as that, which is fairly significant, we better make sure the stimulus package works; that it actually stimulates the economy; that it actually does retard the slowing of forces slowing down the economy and, hopefully, reenergize it.

The proposals which we have on the table and came from the House break into two basic approaches: First is a pure consumption approach, where you basically give people of middle and low incomes in this country—I think it is $80,000 of individual or $175,000 of joint income—a tax rebate of $600 to $1,200. That is a payment. It is structured in a way that some people who don't pay taxes will actually get the payment. The theory is they will take that money and they will go and spend the money and, as a result, the economy will see a boost.

There are two problems with this theory we need to address, however. First, under the present structure of our Internal Revenue Service, the CBO,